

Marina Toropygina

**ICONOLOGIST IN CINEMATOGRAPHY.
FANTASIA AND STYLE AS SEEN BY E. PANOFSKY**

Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) is regarded as the founder of iconology, a method of interpreting the content of works of art. The article considers interpretation examples from Panofsky's articles, books and correspondence that expound his creative method and his attitude to the problems of form and style in particular.

Two reproaches are most frequently made by critics of the iconological method: first, carried away by deciphering the content, the iconologists and iconographers forget about artistic quality and problems of form, and, second, in none of his works did Erwin Panofsky himself use the interpretation model he had proposed. For this reason I would like to begin with recalling the history of the appearance of the model table and to ascertain its significance to the method. This will be followed with some examples of Panofsky's interpretation and his reasoning both about painting and motion pictures. Addressing cinematography is all the more interesting since, unlike many of his educated peers, including art historians, Panofsky loved and respected the cinema. Meanwhile, his famous work *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures* is, as it were, at the periphery of his traditional interests – Western art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The history of the appearance of the table and its subsequent modifications are considered in detail in my book¹; for the sake

Erwin Panofsky



¹ Toropygina, M.Iu. *Ikonologia. Nachalo. Problema simbola u Aby Warburga i v ikonologii ego kruga* (Iconology. The Beginning. The Problem of Symbol in Aby Warburg and in Iconology of His Circle). Moscow, 2015.

of brevity I will list the main facts. Panofsky presented the table for the first time in his report to the neo-Kantian Society meeting in Kiel. It had three horizontal lines (correspondingly, three strata of interpretation): phenomenal meaning (subdivided into objective and expressive), content meaning and documental or essential sense (Dokumentsinn), and three vertical columns: subject matter, the subjective source and the objective corrective of interpretation. His essay was called “On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts” and the word “iconology” was not used in it yet. A new version of the table appeared in *Studies of Iconology* (1939). Another column was added to denote every stage of interpretation. The first stage was pre-iconographic description and pseudo-formal analysis, the second iconographic analysis in the narrow sense of the word. Even though the general title of the collection contains the word “iconology”, the third stratum of the analysis is designated as “iconographic analysis in a deeper sense” (iconographic synthesis). The third strata would be called iconological in yet another version of 1955, when the text would be included in the collection *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. We are thus witnessing the birth of the method: the art historian first makes a report to philosophers, observes how the interpreter operates (including himself) and argues about the interpretation possibilities and limits. His second and third versions appeared when he taught at Princeton, with every stratum of interpretation getting its own denotation and the drive of observation and reasoning in general giving way to a somewhat educational intonation, which made the table look subsequently as a guide for action. Let it be noted that even in this version the method is the synthesis of different levels of perception, understanding and interpretation of an artwork and should not be taken for an instruction requiring consecutive step-by-step execution. One can well begin with the iconographical level, that is, with the identification of characters and a search of sources. It is important to move within the table horizontally rather than vertically from top to bottom: in the 1939 version Panofsky even braces the third vertical column with correcting (1955) – controlling (1939) principles of interpretation and inscribes: “tradition history” (in the 1955 version this name would become the column title).

Comparison of the tables prompts the assumption that the method implied above all the interpreter’s active reflection on his interpretation: at every level of interpretation he is aware of the process of his understanding based on the knowledge of tradition. It is not coincidental that the collection *Meaning in the Visual Arts* was supplied with a subtitle: *Papers In and On Art History*.

In fact, the iconographical level of interpretation was a concession to the 19th century with its historicism and archaeology. In a letter to a student¹ who was interested in Panofsky’s creative method, the scholar explained why iconography was necessary: “I would not say that iconographical

¹ E. Panofsky – William H. Woody, 13.11.1958. *Panofsky E. Korrespondenz*, Band 5, S.358-362.

and historical knowledge increases our aesthetic or emotional reaction in all cases (in mine, it does), but I do believe, that we have to go into these problems as a matter of sheer politeness if and where an artist of the past or present has gone to the trouble of telling a “story”... If we were to tell a visitor, after he has spoken to us for half an hour, that we really didn't listen to what he was saying but only enjoyed his intonation. In other words, the application of the iconographic method is not a postulate *per se*, but a postulate which derives from the nature of the work under discussion”¹.

Apparently, in order to draw a distinction at the terminological level, Panofsky “revives” the word “iconology” to denote his method. For Panofsky it is not an identification of content, the depicted personages, attributes and symbols, nor just an extended interpretation of meanings loaded into the iconographical programme (i.e. in an appropriate text), but a possibility, or at least desire to restore the connection between visual art and world outlook, between image and idea, the artist and the viewer. Therefore, all levels of analysis are important to the observation how this connection is established and operates.

Panofsky himself always found the meaning hidden behind the formal aspects of a work of art important. Although, to get at that meaning, it is still important to realise, Panofsky points out, that Michelangelo depicted the fall of man and not luncheon on the grass, or conversely, that peaches in Renoir are not a symbol of sin, but the proof of renewed interest in still life. The latter statement linked with the understanding and specifying of the genre presupposes knowledge of the history of ideas, that is, in this case the interpreter from the outset references the third level amendment.

The attention Panofsky attached to the interpretation of formal aspects is clear from his polemic with Wölfflin over *The Foundations of Art History* (1915)². Panofsky tries to specify and develop certain theses of his mentor, taking the problem of the development of style from “linear” to “painterly” beyond “pure vision” or the relationship of eye to world (*Verhältnis des Auges zur Welt*). After all, vision as physiologically objective perception of the surrounding world cannot assume the style-forming function. All artists at all different times have the same eye structure. The relationship of eye to world is the relationship of the soul to the world of the eye³. If the artist chooses some possibility of a representation, it is not merely a possible outlook on the world (*Anschaung der Welt*), but a way of world outlook (*Weltanschauung*). In this sense the second and third strata of iconological

¹ E. Panofsky – William H. Woody, 13.11.1958. *Panofsky E. Korrespondenz*, Band 5, S. 358-362.

² *Panofsky E. Das Problem des Stils in der bildenden Kunst // Id. Deutschsprachige Aufsätze / Hg. K. Michels, M. Warnke. Berlin, 1998. Bd. 2. S. 1010.*

³ Wer ist imstande, die – im Sinne des Ästhetischen – noch völlig ungeformte Gegebenheit eines Wahrnehmungsorgans im Sinne eines diesem Wahrnehmungsorgan selbst ganz fremden künstlerischen Formschemas zu interpretieren? Die Antwort kann nur eine sein – die Seele. *Verhältnis des Auges zur Welt ist Verhältnis der Seele zur Welt des Auges.* – Ibid.

interpretation go back to the first: after all the style of representation, be it the peculiarly built perspective or expressively distorted figures in the Art Nouveau period, is also the carrier of sense and meaning.

Panofsky develops the same theme in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1924-5) and in his work on *Early Netherlandish Painting*.

Perspective is also a formal indicator that is subject to be chosen (or sought) by the artist and that can be defined as the carrier of meaning and sense, Panofsky asserts. What is behind it is not the experience of the eye, but the experience of the mind. Mistakes in perspectival construction (from the contemporary point of view) or the complete absence of perspective have no effect on the artistic quality of the work. It is a stylistic characteristic, but it can be designated as a “symbolic form”, because in this case “spiritual content-meaning (geistiger Bedeutungsinhalt) is combined with a concrete sensually perceived sign (sinnliches Zeichen) and turns out to be innerly linked with it”; precisely for this reason not only the presence of perspective in different epochs and regions is essentially important, but also what sort of perspective it is¹. The different forms of perspectival structures also reflect the different concepts and ideas of the organisation of the world and space.

Comparing Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* with the San Clemente (Rome) fresco showing the death of St Ambrose², Panofsky points out that the Italian master uses light as the quantitative and insulating principle (with shadows forming the shape of objects he arranged them in the picture space and positioned the viewer before the depicted space. Van Eyck, on the contrary, uses light as a qualitative and unifying principle: he is interested in refraction, reflection and light diffusion – reflexes on the metal or glass surface, the shine or fur and fabric, glints, representation of fire, mirror reflections and colour chiaroscuro. From the point of view of building perspective, in the Italian case space is interpreted as complete and enclosed in the picture. The front plane section in Van Eyck’s picture suggests that space is expanding and the viewer becomes part of it: in this case Panofsky speaks about “osmosis” between the closed room and the Universe.

¹ Das scheint nun an und für sich eine rein mathematische und keine künstlerische Angelegenheit zu sein, denn mit Recht darf man sagen, daß die größere oder geringere Fehlerhaftigkeit, ja selbst die völlige Abwesenheit einer perspektivischen Konstruktion nichts mit dem künstlerischen Wert zu tun hat. <...> Allein wenn Perspektive kein Wertmoment ist, so ist sie doch ein Stilmoment, ja mehr noch: sie darf, um Ernst Cassirers glücklich geprägter Terminus auch für die Kunstgeschichte nutzbar zu machen, als eine jener „symbolischen Formen“ bezeichnet werden, durch die „ein geistiger Bedeutungsinhalt an ein konkretes sinnliches Zeichen geknüpft und diesem Zeichen innerlich zugeeignet wird“; und es ist in diesem Sinne für die einzelnen Kunstepochen und Kunstgebiete wesensbedeutsam, nicht nur, ob sie Perspektive haben, sondern auch welche Perspektive sie haben. – Ibid. S.268.

Here Panofsky cites Cassirer E. *Der Begriff der symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften [1921/1922] // Id. Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs. Darmstadt, 1956. S. 171-200.* Hier S. 175.

² Panofsky E. *Die alt-niederländische Malerei. Köln, 2006. Bd.1, S.15–17.*

Therefore, perspectival construction has different functions: to enrich the picture optically (in the North) and to attain stereometric clarity (in the Italian version). Panofsky links these distinctions with the northern striving after individualisation, attention to detail and the study of individual things the way they were, on the one hand, and with searches of an ideal, a common principle governing the existing or manmade things that were characteristic of Italian mentality of the Renaissance period, on the other.

In his essays on cinematography Panofsky also begins with analysis of formal aspects. The main idea of his paper "On Movies" (1936) is apologia of the cinema as a kind of art. It was a lecture read at the Museum of Modern Art in the New York City, where a movie archive was being founded. Addressing the museum public and curators, Panofsky speaks not about the content, educational or ideological importance of the motion pictures, but about the formal and stylistic specifics of conveying content, which account for the cinema's special place in art. In the later editions¹ "style and medium" were added to the title, literally pointing to the carrier of content. The very enthusiasm about defining the peculiarities of style and expression in different kinds of art cannot but bring to mind Lessing's *Laocoon*.

Space and time became central concepts with Panofsky: they were pivotal not only to the Kantian discourse, but also suggested influence of the topical problems of natural sciences; at any rate Panofsky knew Einstein from Princeton. The basic characteristic of the new kind of art was that it offered new opportunities for the interaction between time and space. Panofsky called it dynamisation of space and spatialisation of time. At the very beginning of the article Panofsky writes that the pleasure the spectator experiences at the cinema is unrelated to a certain story or the play of forms, it is the pure joy of observing moving pictures. But perhaps the reason why Panofsky liked the film *The Navigator* was not only Buster Keaton's exceptional acting abilities, but also because it was especially interesting to observe the relations between time and space in the conditions of the closed and at the same time movable space of the ship.

Giving due to the iconographic tradition, Panofsky points out in the early motion pictures motifs, types, characters and emblematic details that helped cinemagoers recognize eternal themes of pictorial art. A femme fatale and a virtuous maiden are a parallel to the wise and foolish virgins, with details, such as a checkered tablecloth as an indispensable attribute of a picture of a poor but decent family. The iconographic use of the colour gamut: night scenes are printed in blue or green. And, finally, another example of stable iconography: showing the seemingly small and weak score victory over the seemingly large and strong. Here Panofsky draws a parallel between the Mickey Mouse stories and David contesting Goliath.

¹ There are three versions of this paper: "On Movies", 1936, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures", 1937, and "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures", 1947. See Lavin I. Panofsky's Humor // Panofsky E. Stil und Medium im Film & Die ideologischen Vorläufer des Rolls-Royce-Kühlers, Frankfurt/Main, 1999, S. 10.

As Panofsky uses the attribute “small”, it stands to reason that we have chosen Donatello’s David rather than that of Michelangelo for comparative illustration in this report.

Let us, however, take as an example Panofsky’s reasoning and appraisal in which formal and iconographic aspects are combined in a peculiar way. I mean Walt Disney’s *Fantasia*.

Panofsky attended the premiere at the Broadway Theatre (then called Colony, 2000 seats) in New York City on 13 November 1940. *Fantasia* was a “new form of entertainment”¹ that mixed the traditions of the musical, silent movies with music accompaniment, concert and even lecture. In a live action introduction to *Fantasia* the composer and music critic Deems Taylor said that the audience was to see designs and pictures and stories that the artists imagined under the impact of music. According to his introduction, three kinds of music were used in the film: “First is the kind that tells a definite story, then there is the kind that while it has no specific story, does paint a series of more or less definite pictures; then there is a third kind, music, that exists for its own sake”². *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach is “absolute music, even the title has no meaning beyond a description of the form of the music”³. Work with music is thus considered from the point of view of its narrative potential and possibilities of its representation.

In his letter to John Abbott⁴ dated 15 November 1940⁵ Panofsky explains that, in addition to his gratitude and admiration for Disney’s work he would like to share “some ideas which occurred to me when I tried to rationalize my impressions”.

To begin with, it is a matter of the relationship between music and picture. As if in response to Deems Taylor, Panofsky asserts that “the only thing which matters is whether or not the music is self-sufficient, that is to say, whether or not it demands, or at least tolerates, the accompaniment of visible movement in space. This has nothing to do with the value of music, nor with its ‘content’, but is merely a question of character: all types of dance music (not only ballets, but also... Strauss waltzes, or Brahms’ Hungarian dances... all operatic music, Händel’s *Water Music* belong ipso facto to the second class. Exceptions – Menuet movement in the symphonies, Bach’s suites”. According to Panofsky, “...the basic and entirely low-brow fact is, that music is either intended to be listened to or to

¹ *Fantasia*, produced by Walt Disney, 1940. Introduction by Deems Taylor, 2:12.

² First is the kind that tells a definite story, then there is the kind, that while it has no specific story, does paint a series of more or less definite pictures; then there is a third kind, music, that exists for its own sake. - *Fantasia*, 02:57 – 03:03.

³ *Ibid.*, 03:04–03:17.

⁴ John E. Abbott was the husband of Iris Barry, the founder and first curator of the cinema section of the MOMA. It was the two of them who gave Panofsky invitation tickets to the premiere on behalf of Walt Disney.

⁵ Panofsky E. Korrespondenz, Band 2 (2003) S. 271–275.

serve as a stimulus to something going on in space. Only the second class ... is 'picturizable', and it does not matter what kind of pictures are selected, in this respect the imagination of the cartoonist is absolutely free"¹.

Later on in an article of 1947 Panofsky would recall *Fantasia* and describe this possibility for music to come into contact with a moving picture as a principle of coexpressibility.

In his letter Panofsky goes on pondering on the potential of metamorphosis that, according to him, is a distinguishing feature of animated cartoons as a type of art. Static objects start behaving as mechanisms or animals and animals as simultaneously as animals and people, that is, acquire a life different from that of their own. From this point of view Panofsky welcomes the representation of the elements, change of seasons or "the action of a lava stream as a drama". Ostriches that are both ostriches and ballerinas are another example of a felicitous metamorphosis. (The *Fantasia* bonus includes documentary takes showing a live ballerina posing for cartoonists drawing the movements of ostriches and hippopotamuses, Degas' picture in Walt Disney's study served as another source of inspiration.) From the point of view of iconographic interpretation metamorphosis makes it more difficult to describe and analyse because you have to decide whether the ostriches are shown as ballerinas or the other way round.

People in animation cannot be represented "the way they are": they should be "transformed". To undergo a metamorphosis, they "have to be dehumanized in order to live up to the standard of their environment". Some characters, like fairies personifying the forces of nature, are shown as "more than human" while others, like Popeye the Sailor man and his girlfriend Olive Oyl, "less than human". When people (or suchlike creatures) remain the way they are, the animated cartoon magic is destroyed. When Panofsky took up the theme in his article (1947 version), he compared the release of *Snow White* with *The Fall* because a human figure had appeared in animation. All those princesses, gnomes, baseball players and centaurs were veritable caricatures rather than metamorphoses. Going back to *Fantasia*, Panofsky pointed out that the "screening" of ostrich and hippopotamus ballets could be considered a success, whereas he found the fantasies on the themes of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and Schubert's Ave Maria "deplorable".

¹ The only thing which matters is whether or not the music is self-sufficient, that is to say, whether or not it demands, or at least tolerates, the accompaniment of visible movement in space. This has nothing to do with the value of music, nor with its "content", but is merely a question of character: all types of dance music (not only ballets, but also... Strauss waltzes, or Brahms' Hungarian dances...all operatic music, Händel's "Water Music" belong ipso facto to the second class. Exceptions – Menuet movement in the symphonies, Bach's suites. ... the basic and entirely low-brow fact is, that music is either intended to be listened to or to serve as a stimulus to something going on in space. Only the second class ... is "picturizable", and it does not matter what kind of pictures are selected, in this respect the imagination of the cartoonist is absolutely free. – Ibid.

The centaurs appear in that part of *Fantasia* where the Pastoral Symphony is used – music, according to Panofsky, closed for “screening”. This is interesting because its movements have subtitles, for instance, *Scene by the Brook* or *Merry Gathering of Country Folk*, that enable presupposition of “pictorial” scenes. In general, centaurs, centaurettes, Dionysus, flowers and trees are associated with the pastoral theme. However, if we follow Panofsky’s logic, the rendition of music originally did not presuppose any accompanying “movement in space”, while the centaurs are shown too “true to life” and not meeting the “metamorphosis” requirement.

Another “unfortunate” case, according to Panofsky, is the narrative to Schubert’s *Ave Maria*, in which music not intended for action is wrongly used. However, from the point of view of Disney’s (and Taylor’s) logic using that music was appropriate because it is connected with a certain story: Schubert composed *Ave Maria* as part of a song cycle after Walter Scott’s *Lady of the Lake*, setting to music one of Ellen’s songs¹. The artist Kay Nielsen who sketched action for that sequence was apparently inspired by mountaintops, Gothic arches and silhouettes in counter light from Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings, while the final frame replicated the composition of the Tetschen Altar. On the face of it that seems to be nearly a perfect match: German romantic painting (and music) meet English romantic poetry. However, the romanticism of Friedrich somewhat differs in tone from the poem’s lyrical and heroic motifs. Friedrich’s themes were loneliness, the eternity of nature and frailness of life². We can surmise that Panofsky felt the mismatched charge and the far-fetched use of iconography in *Fantasia*’s final fragment, that is, the borrowing of a form of expression without any correlation with the form of content, to use Hjelmslev’s linguistic terminology.

In addition, in the letter cited above Panofsky made a rather sharp joke about the music arrangement, saying that “...what Stokowski has done to the music as such with cutting and re-orchestration ... I hope will come up on the occasion of the Last Judgement”. In that sequence, too, Schubert’s original was reworked: an aria solo was adapted for chorus and orchestra³.

Obviously, the means of expression used by Disney and Stokowski were at variance with the cultural experience and memory of Panofsky. What is more, they had different professional objectives: as a practician Disney adapted classical heritage quite off-handedly but effectively gradually himself turning into a classic. As a viewer, critic and art historian Panofsky

¹ The Lady of the Lake, canto 3, verse 29.

² Die Zeit der Herrlichkeit des Tempels und seiner Diener ist dahin, und aus dem zertrümmerten Ganzen eine andere Zeit und ein anderes Verlangen nach Klarheit und Wahrheit hervorgegangen. (Friedrich, Aufzeichnungen) - Caspar David Friedrich. Katalog der Ausstellung der Hamburger Kunsthalle, 1974. München, 1981. S. 60.

³ In this version with its stressed rhythmical accents the aria becomes short of dance music.

In this form the melody is even adapted for figure skaters’ programmes.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNeUgrM59r0>

deemed it his duty not only to share impressions and pass judgement, but also “rationalize my impressions“. He closes his letter with a fairly optimistic “...how fascinating the experience has been”.

One can have different ideas about why Panofsky did not like certain sequences of *Fantasia* and his own explanations may seem not quite convincing, including as far as the differentiation between metamorphosis and caricature is concerned. However, it is indicative that, when substantiating his preferences, he himself draws attention not to the choice of themes or the use of antiquity motifs or other iconography, but considers the phenomenon by describing and analyzing its form.

To sum up, the problems of style and form prove no less but perhaps even more important to the iconologist. If we go back to the table and method, it is obvious that Panofsky’s method itself cannot be fixed “iconographically” as a set of some canonical actions and formulas and that an iconographic interpretation does not presuppose any final judgement closing the theme, but requires that the interpreter himself control his work and correlate his inferences with the history of tradition. At the same time Panofsky’s method is an open system that is mastered through the interpreter’s style and means, such as the clarity and logic of scholarly thought, classical erudition and interest in the “non-classical” art of the cinema, witty argumentation and elegant style.